



Knights of the Open Palm

Carroll John Daly

Race Williams, who plays both ends against the middle, runs up against the hooded order and tackles a mystery which leads him into some fast and tragic action. His opinion of the Klan is not very high, but he tells about it in language which is rugged and dramatic, if not absolutely faultless.

RACE WILLIAMS, PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR, that's what the gilt letters spell across the door of my office. It don't mean nothing, but the police have been looking me over so much lately that I really need a place to receive them. You see I don't want them coming to my home; not that I'm over particular, but a fellow must draw the line somewheres.

As for my business; I'm what you might call the middleman—just a halfway house between the dicks and the crooks. Oh, there ain't no doubt that both the cops and the crooks take me for a gun, but I ain't—not rightly speaking. I do a little honest shooting once in a while—just in the way of business. But my conscience is clear; I never bumped off a guy what didn't need it. And I can put it over the crooks every time—why, I know more about crooks than what they know about themselves. Yep, Race Williams, Private Investigator, that's me.

Most of my business I hunt up and the office ain't much good except as an air of respectability. But sometimes I get a call, one client speaking to another about me. And that's the lay of it this time.

I was in my office straightening out the mail, and enjoying some of the threatening letters what the boys who lack a sense of humor

had sent me, when this Earnest Thompson blows in. And “blows” ain’t no fancy way of putting it neither; this guy actually blows and it’s near five minutes before he quits blowing and opens up.

“Are you afraid of the Ku Klux Klan?”

That’s his first crack out of the box.

“I ain’t afraid of nothing.”

I tell him the truth and then, wanting to be absolutely on the level, I ask:

“Providing there’s enough jack in it.”

He trots out a sigh like my words had lifted a weight from his chest.

“You don’t happen to belong to that—that order?”

I think he was going to call it something else—but from the twitching of his mouth I get the idea that he went in some fear of that same order.

“No,” I says. “I don’t belong to any order.”

Of course I’m like all Americans—a born joiner. It just comes to us like children playing; we want to be in on everything that’s secret and full of fancy names and trick grips. But it wouldn’t work with me; it would be mighty bad in my line. I’d have to take an oath never to harm a brother—not that I wouldn’t keep my oath, but think of the catch in it. I might just be drawing a bead on a lad when I’d spot his button; then I’d have to drop my gun. Of course that ain’t so bad, but that same lad mightn’t be wise that I was one of the crowd and—blooey—he’d blow my roof off. No, I like to play the game alone. And that’s why I ain’t never fallen for the lure of being a joiner.

Well, this lad must of had the idea that half the country belonged to the Ku Klux and that the other half went about in fear of them, for when he finds out that I don’t belong he beams all over and pump-handles me a couple of hundred times. Then he comes out with the glad tidings that a gent I helped out of trouble had told him about me; with that he opens up with the bad news. His son had been took by the Ku Klux.

His boy, Willie Thompson, who is only seventeen, goes hunting around in the woods a bit outside of the town they live in. Clinton is

the name of the burg and it's in the West, which is all I'm at liberty to tell about it except that it's a county seat. Well, Willie stumbles across a bunch of the Klan and sees them tar and feather a woman—and what's more, he recognizes some of the Klan—this boy having an eye for big feet and an ear for low voices.

It appears that this woman had sold liquor to a member of the Klan who told her his poor old father was dying—you see, her husband run a drugstore. Now wasn't that just too sweet of the boys? Of course they checked up a lot of other things against her, too, and give her warning to leave town in twenty-four hours. Yep, they give her all those little courtesies what a lady should expect. But the real secret of the story goes that one of the lads of the Night Shirt Brigade was in love with the woman and wanted to get hunk because she couldn't see him a mile.

Now, that's Earnest Thompson's side of the story and not mine, but at all events the town of Clinton was pretty well stirred up and some of the Klan were actually in jail for as much as ten minutes. But when the trial came off this Willie Thompson had been kidnapped. The father worried, of course, but he thought the boy would be back when the trial was over. That was two weeks ago; the trial had blown up and the boy never heard from again.

Why, the whole thing seemed unbelievable. Think of it; here was this man with a good suspicion if not an actual knowledge of who had his son and he trots all the way to the city for me. Imagine if it had a been my boy—blooey—I'd a bumped that gang off one, two, three right down the line. But this lad was scared stiff; if he made a break to the authorities he got a threatening letter and—well, here he was.

But he made his offer a very alluring one: a good fat check, for this Thompson was a wealthy farmer. So I took the case and you should a seen his face light up.

"I didn't think that I could get anyone to defy the Klan." He takes me by the hand again. "I hope that you—that you won't give up when you find what you are up against."

Now that almost made me laugh.

“Don’t you worry about me,” I says. “And don’t you worry about the boy. If he’s alive and the Klan have him—why—I’ll get him back to you in jig time; and no mistake about that.”

Was I blowing a bit? Oh, I don’t know. I’d said the same thing before and—well—I made good.

So the curtain goes up; he was to go back to Clinton that night and I was to follow in a day or two.

That night I trot down the avenue looking for some dope on this same Ku Klux Klan. I’d read a lot about it in the papers, but I didn’t take much stock in it—mostly newspaper talk, it struck me.

It was in Mike Clancy’s gin mill that I decided to get my information, for Mike belonged to every order under the sun.

But Mike shook his head:

“So you’ve fell for the lure, too?” he says sadly. “All the boys are crossing the river or going south to join the Klan—there’s money in it and no mistake.”

“Are you a member?” I ask him again.

“Not me.” He shakes his head. “When it first hit the city I spoke to Sergeant Kelly about it. B-r-r-r-r! It ain’t no order for an Irishman. Sure, it’s the A.P.A. and worse. But if you must know about it, why, ask Dumb Rogers over there.”

And he jerked his thumb toward a little dip what was sitting alone at a table in the corner.

And this same Rogers sure did give me an earful; that’s how he got his name Dumb—he talked so much.

“The Klan?” he starts in. “I should say I did know about it. The boys is leaving the avenue by the carloads. You see they go south or west and join the Klan; then when there is a raid on and some lad is to be beat up, why the boys clean up a bit on the side. Suppose a jeweler is to leave town and don’t and the Klan get after him—see the game—a ring or two is nothing to grab. And he dassen’t say nothing—you write him a threatening letter or telephone him is better.”

He paused a moment and looked at me.

“Don’t tell me about the Klan—I know—I was a member and I was well on the road to making my fortune when they got on to me.

They expelled me; threw me out like I wasn't no gentleman—that's what they done. And for why—just for going through a guy. Now, what do you think of that?" he demanded indignantly.

"That's tough, Rogers—tell me—how do you join?"

"Well, you got'a be white and an American and a Protestant—and you got'a have ten dollars—though if you've got the ten the rest of it can be straightened out. Yes, they got my ten, and what's more they got six-fifty for the old white robe—sixteen-fifty all together and they chucked me out—not so much as—"

But I interrupted him. I was after the passwords of the Klan and their greetings.

After a few more drinks he sure did open up; what with The Exalted Cyclops, Klaliff, Klokard, Kludd, Kligrapp, Klabee, Kladd, Klexter, Klokann, Kloran and a host of others I didn't know where I stood and had to call a halt. But I got the grip out of him, which was a shake with the left hand. Then he give me the salute which I take careful note of. It was copped from the Confederate Army and is made by placing the right hand over the right eye and then turning the hand so that the palm is in front.

"But remember the one important thing." Dumb Rogers points a boney finger at me. "When you meet another Klansman you always say, 'AYAK,' meaning, 'Are you a Klansman?' If you ever hear a lad pull that on you—you answer, 'AKIA'—'A Klansman I am.' The rest of it is a lot of junk and most of the boys can't remember it—but them's the two principal things."

Then he showed me a cheap little celluloid button which he wore wrong end out in the lapel of his coat. When he turned it about I seen the letters KOTOP, which he explained meant "Knights of the Open Palm."

Do you get it—why it looked like they were stealing the waiter's stuff. That order certainly must have been started by a dish carrier. But I took a good look at the back of that button—you couldn't tell nothing from it, but I sure would keep my eyes open when I seen a lad sporting a decoration that way.

Three days later finds me in Clinton, a little burg of three or four thousand and the county seat. But don't get the idea that it was a

one-horse town; even the farmers went about in flivvers and some of the people went about in real sporty cars. You'd never take it for a town that was in the grip of some half-baked organization.

The hotel, though, was the regular thing; I guess it had stood the same way for twenty-five years; it was called the Clinton House, which don't show much originality.

And with all my plans for my work being secret I wasn't there above half an hour when Earnest Thompson blows in. He was all excited; the Klan had come out in the paper that they had nothing to do with the disappearance of Willie Thompson and those who thought different had better hold their tongues. He showed me the clipping and sure enough it was a direct threat at the whole town.

But that wasn't why he come. Since seeing me he had received an anonymous letter hinting that his son knew something about a suspected Klan murder over at a town twenty miles away.

"I think he did, too," Thompson said. "I think that he kept it from me, but was going to give the information out at the trial. He didn't tell me all he knew because he feared for my safety." Of course that was news, but it wasn't good policy for him to drop right in on me. Why, if the Klan had half an eye out they'd know what was in the wind, and results proved that they did.

That very night Old Thompson was visited in his home by a number of white-robed figures and—well—we'll put it down to the fear that something might happen to his boy—but anyway he out with the whole story of how he had hired me to come down. He may have had some excuse; his nerves may have been shot to pieces, but this same Thompson sure lacked guts.

And the next day he lights out of town and calls me up. He tells me what happened and how he was forced to tell and then up and begs me to stay on the case. And what's more, he promises to double the check. What do you think? I stayed on, of course. I felt like bawling him out, but I didn't. The whole world might know why I was there and perhaps it wouldn't do this gang no harm to learn the sort of a man they had to deal with.

And that night the Klan honored me with a visit. Three of them there were and they must have put on their getup in the hall. Yep,

all dolled up like the heavy chorus in a burlesque show they walked in on me.

Two of them stood one on either side of the door, rubbing their knees together, acting like they was a couple of businessmen what didn't like playing the fool. But the third lad was different—he was the real thing and no fake about him. He was big and powerful as he swung across the floor and faced me. He stood so a moment, glaring down at me through the slits in his white hood.

I just sat there in the chair looking him over and smoking; then I grinned. I couldn't help it. I could see the deadly threat coming.

“You are not a member of the Klan—the Great Invisible Empire?”

And he out with the last three words like he was announcing the batteries for the day's game at the Polo Grounds.

“No, I ain't,” I tell him, pretending to wipe away a tear. “I wanted to join, but—well, you see I catch cold so easy. I got to stick to the pajamas.”

But he never made a break, so I see I was wasting my time kidding that bird. So I made things easy for him.

“Don't try to figure it out,” I says. “Come spill the sad news. Surely this ain't no pleasure call; out with the dirt!”

I don't know if he got it all or not, but he come out flat-footed and didn't make no more bones about it. And I'm giving him credit for a lad that talked like he meant business.

“You have caused the displeasure of the Klan; we want no hired gunmen in Clinton,” he said. “You have twenty-four hours to leave town—twenty-four.”

“You couldn't make that twenty-five,” I chirp. “You see, I want to attend your next meeting and sort of bust things up.”

Oh, I just wanted to get him mad.

And it worked!

“You have heard me.” I can almost see him glare through the slits. “And be careful of that tongue of yours, for I have a gun—a gun that I draw and shoot in one second.”

And then he finished things up with a string of oaths that, if not original, were at least well chosen.

But he was speaking my language now—this gun business—and I just stood up and faced him.

“Listen, Dough-head.” And I wasn’t talking for pleasure now. “So you have a gun that shoots in one second, eh? Well, let me give you some advice. If that’s the best you can do you had better keep that gun parked. I’m telling you flat that you’d be exactly one-half a second too late.”

His hand half lowered to his side.

“If you don’t believe me try it,” I encouraged. “Your two friends there can carry you out.”

Was I bluffing? Say, I was talking gospel and he knew it.

Then, when he didn’t try nothing, I whipped out my gun and covered the three of them. And with that I make a grab and pull off the big lad’s hood. I just wanted to get one look at his map and one look was enough—you could a picked him in a straw hat at Coney Island. He had a chin like one of the Smith Brothers or both of them—all whiskers and all hair and eyebrows.

“Listen, Feather-Face.” I pound his ribs gentle like with the automatic. “You ain’t dealing with no women nor a half-grown boy nor a distracted father now. You’ll give me twenty-four hours, will you? Well, I’ll give you twenty-four seconds to get out. And the next time you come around here I’ll take that night shirt off you and shove it down your throat—whiskers and all.”

I was mad now and meant it. This white-hooded frightener of women and children couldn’t come none of that high-falutin game on me, and what’s more I didn’t like the names he had called me.

“You’ve had one look at my gun,” I told them as they sneaked out. “The next time you have cause to see it you’ll see it smoking; now—beat it!”

Which they done. Say, them boys had never had such a shock in their lives. I just sat down on the bed and roared.

The next morning I find a little slip under my door; it’s from the hotel manager and it asks me to leave. So the Klan had opened up. Of course, I wasn’t ready to go and I knew that they couldn’t drive

me out. You see, the town was about half and half; the authorities didn't side with the Klan nor they didn't come out against it; everybody was just sitting tight to see which way things was going to break. But if I was going to do a little gunning I'd need my night's sleep and if this manager was against me it would keep me pretty well on the jump. But I just shrug my shoulders and beat it downstairs, thinking things over.

I nod good morning to Jimmy O'Brien, the clerk. He's a real friendly lad and his handle tells me that he ain't no Klansman. There was no one else in the lobby, so I just wander to the doors and look out. And through them doors I catch a slant which is sure surprising even way off in that little Western town. Three men are coming down the street—single file—and there's about twenty-five feet between; right down the center of the main street they walk. Each has a gun swinging from his shoulder, but it don't hang over his back; it's swinging loose and mighty handy under the armpit—just a movement and it's ready to shoot.

The leader is a man which I place at over sixty; he's small but stocky—the other two must be in the thirties, big strapping giants of men.

I half turn as a figure comes to my side; it's Jimmy O'Brien. Of course I know that he's heard about my visitors last night. He was in the lobby when they beat it out.

"Who's the three desperadoes that take the middle of the road—more of the Klan?" I ask the clerk.

"No," says Jimmy. "That's Buck Jabine and his two sons. They are the only ones in town that openly defy the Klan. This Buck Jabine killed three men back in the old days—no, they ain't a family to fool with."

I could see that as they tramped up the street; they look business, all three of them.

"You see," Jimmy explained, "Buck talked against the Klan and then he began to get threatening letters. But he didn't leave town. He opened up with a warning that anyone found on his property after dark would be shot. This Buck shoots straight and quick—since

that warning he ain't had no trouble—only letters. But they are coming here.”

He breaks off suddenly.

The next minute they come in the door—one, two, three.

The old man takes one look around and then comes straight up to me.

“Stranger,” he says, “I take it that you’re Race Williams. Last night’s doings got about a bit—shake—my name is Buck Jabine.”

With that he sticks out his fin and the two sons do the same, though there ain’t a yip out of them.

“I hear you ain’t none too friendly with the boys, neither.” I try to make things pleasant.

But he don’t smile; he just looks at me. He’s a chap what takes things seriously.

“Well.” Buck just stroked his chin. “I just wanted to shake hands with you and tell you that I have a place out in the country—about two mile. Any time you want a place to sleep peaceful walk out—the house will be open to you day and night. I don’t take no sides, mind you. Buck Jabine is only interested in his own family—he don’t stand for no interference—but my house is open to you, wide open.”

I thank him and then tell him about the manager’s little note—just in the way of light conversation, you know. I’ve made up my mind to stick at the hotel.

“When they put me out of a bum joint like this, they’ll put me out in a cloud of smoke,” I tell Buck.

“Humph!”

He strokes his chin again; then turns sudden and struts straight into the manager’s office.

I try to get sociable with the sons, but don’t make a go of it. I’m looking for dope on the Klan, but there is nothing doing. Oh, they’re friendly enough, but don’t go in for conversation. They don’t even open up with a grin when I make wise cracks about night shirts and pajamas. They just stare at me. I could see that I’d have a right down sociable time over at their place.

“Yes” and “No” and a few “I don’t reckons” is the best I gather, though once one of them opens up enough to ask me the time. So I guess the old man does the talking for the family; all together, it looks like a closed corporation.

And then Buck trots out of the office and the manager is right on his heels. My, but that manager is all smiles and tells me how it was all a mistake and begs me to stay on. And he means it, too, for behind that smile he looks real worried. Of course I ain’t so stupid but that I know that this Buck Jabine has something to say about it and I sort of pity the manager. He’s between Buck and the Klan and he ain’t got much choice. Still, I think he was doing the right thing. He couldn’t tell if the Klan would get him or not, but Buck—well, one look at Buck was enough; him and that family of his was all business.

“Ain’t you worried about something happening to your house while you’re away?” I ask Buck when he’s leaving.

He just gives me the up and down for a minute and then he draws back his upper lip; I think it was meant for a smile, but I ain’t sure. Then he chirps:

“There ain’t no danger; Sarah’s home and the boys’ women. No, there ain’t no danger.”

With that they all file out and tramp down the center of the street—the same single file. So I see that this is sure one nice little family.

Now, this Klan ain’t as secret as what I had thought. After Buck leaves, Jimmy, the clerk, up and gives me quite an earful. Sometimes them birds have even paraded right down Main Street and more than once they have taken out some citizen and tarred and feathered him. Then they’ll bring the victim back and dump him out of a car right in the center of the Square by the fountain. See’n’ they’ll forget to put his clothes on again would seem like they lacked modesty.

When there were any deaths about the State due to the Klan’s midnight playfulness, why, the Klan would come out in the paper denying it and announcing that they would expel any member who had a hand in it. Which is real generous of them, you’ll admit; open-handed and fair-minded, to be sure. And then Jimmy outs with

some real news: there's a Klan meeting that night. It's an open secret that they're taking in new members. So I see it ain't a falling organization but a growing one and I'd better work fast.

All day long that hotel is watched—there ain't no doubt about it. Three lads in the front and one out in the back. People what drop in dodge me like they would the plague and the general feeling is that I'm a marked man. Well, they may get me; the thing's possible; but if they do, the local undertaker is going to have more business than he's had in years.

Jimmy's a good scout and when he goes off duty about noontime he sneaks up and has a chat with me. So I take him into my confidence to a certain extent, and I believe if he didn't have a wife and kid he'd a been with me forty ways from the ace.

But he tells me where the Klan meeting place is and how people don't dare go near it. Then he tells me that he has a bicycle and after I bit I get his promise to hide it in a barn down the street behind the hotel; the fellow what owns the barn goes by the label of Dugan—enough said!

I watch out pretty carefully all evening and I don't see more than one chap watching the back of that house—so at nine o'clock I'm ready to pull off my little trick; I'm bent on joining in the festivities of the Klan.

There's a little partition off the back of the hotel and I get Jimmy to slip me in there unnoticed. Out in the dark of the tiny rear window I can see the solitary figure about ten yards away; it's a lonely little alley and no one else passes by. So I spring my game. I take my pillowcase, which I've made to look like a Klan hood, and, slipping it over my head, I light a candle and stand there in the open window; after a bit I give the Klan Salute—then I beckon the distant figure to me.

As I say, the whole Klan is a child's game, and that duck comes to me on the run; he most likely thinks that things are arranged for tarring and feathering me. As for me, well—I just club my gun and bat him over the head and he falls pretty—right in a nice dark spot.

Five minutes I wait and then, when there's nothing doing I step out the window and beat it down the alley. A few minutes later I'm

on the bike, speeding out toward the open country and in the direction which Jimmy give me where lays what is known as the Klavern or meeting place.

All I need now is the regulation night shirt and I've laid plans to get that. Jimmy has seen the gang going to the meetings and knows the place that they stop their cars and put on the regalia. And what's more, he's told me about a lad whose business kept him late in town. It was this cluck that traveled alone in a Ford that I was looking for.

I guess I got to that spot a bit ahead of time. It was just around a bend in the road and very lonely. There was a nice place well back in the bushes where I parked my bike and waited. The night was dark, but I could see fairly well and in the course of twenty minutes about three cars pulled up and the occupants got all rigged out in their ghostly costumes. They'd just slip on the white robe and then crown themselves with the hood. If one party was decorating themselves there the next party would stop farther down the road.

After that I waited near an hour and then my man comes; all alone in a Ford he is and in some hurry. He don't even get out of the flivver, but tries to do the lightning change right in the car.

Say! I caught him with one arm in and one arm out of the shirt. Surprised! Why, he opened and closed his mouth just like a fish and a pretty far gone fish, too.

"None of your lip," I tell him when he started to spout about the terrible things that would happen to me. "You know me, kid."

I tickled his chin with my gat.

"I handled three of your breed last night. Come! Jump out of that night shirt or they'll bury you in it."

No laughter in my voice then—when I'm gunning I'm a bad man—none worse!

Enough! He showed good sense and handed over the whole outfit. It didn't take me more than a couple of minutes to bind him with the rope I had brought; then I tied him to a tree out of view of the road and, jumping into his car, I drove away.

A few hundred yards or more down the road I see the turn I'm looking for and a short drive down a rough lane and things are

starting. A white-robed figure holds up his hand and stops me; of course in my robe he takes me for one of the clucks. I spot this lad for the Klexter, the outer guard.

“White and Supremacy,” I say like a regular.

After that it’s gravy; I go through my stuff which I got from Dumb Rogers. After a Salute he passes me and I turn into a field where there is near fifty cars parked.

Here I have to go through the speeches again with the Klarogo, the inner guard. But everything is rosy and pretty soon I pass down a narrow glade and into the Klavern itself. It was a fairly large open space surrounded by the thick woods—a good place to scatter if the cops come, I guess. There were near a hundred gathered about and when I slip in the show is already on.

“Imperial One, the men who seek admission to our legions stand prepared,” a voice suddenly booms out, and with that all the robed figures gather about in a circle.

Then a lad with a cross all lit up breezes in and behind him march about eight lads—the candidates—looking for their ten dollars’ worth. And they got it; in wind at least. I never heard so much talking in my life.

The Head Goblin, a bird fixed up in white and scarlet, lets off steam about sending everybody to hell while the Klan took care of law and order. It was bum stuff, most of it, and if I’d a been one of the candidates I’d a hollered for my money back.

The members is not called brothers or anything like that; they are called citizens and the initiation is called being naturalized, and they take an oath which would knock you cock-eyed for length, bad English and rotten principles. And then the new citizens swear never to tell anything nor give any evidence against a Klansman unless he’s committed rape, willful murder or treason. Hot dog! Burglars, counterfeiters, and check-raisers welcome—also arson might be appreciated—I don’t know. But I sure do see why Dumb Rogers was sore and why all the crooks are joining.

Then the little buttons are given out with no extra charge but lots more wind; those buttons must have been worth all of ten for a cent

—when I was a kid we use to pick better in a nickel's worth of popcorn.

But I don't get no real dope; not a mention of the boy nor a mention of me, which sure hurts my pride. Then I get the how of their pulling off the real dirt without being openly to blame. Committees is appointed, but they don't say what for. See the lay of it? If you have an enemy—why, get on a committee—it's hot stuff!

The real fellows who just enter the Klan because they are born joiners don't know half the time why they are beating up some helpless old man or weak woman. They just do it. Why—God alone knows. They forget their manhood and listen to all the wind about cleaning up the world and making it safe for the white race. And all for ten bucks. Oh, I'm a pretty tough egg—none tougher, I guess, but I felt as white as my robe in comparison with most of that gang.

And just when I'm wondering what good this whole show is going to do me, outside of improving my morals, I get a real shock. There's a commotion outside the circle and the outer guard rushes in and following him is—is my victim of the Ford.

Some excitement then and I can see my finish unless I duck and—and I ducked. In the excitement it was easy to slip back through the circle of white figures and into the thick foliage. I lay low there, where I can see what's going on. I'm not leaving yet—no—not me! I still got unfinished business. There sure will be a few dead Kleagles, to say nothing of a couple of Klodards and one thing and another, if this bunch get mussy with me.

You see, I suspect they'll unmask, looking for me, but no such thing. After they quiet down a bit the lad what thinks I wronged him starts around the circle, examining all the uniforms. He must have spilt soup or something on his, else how could he tell it? But he has no luck and after a little more talk they just bust up the meeting and beat it. The fear of Race Williams has been placed in their hearts. So I lay there a while, cussing my hard luck.

I'm wondering if they'll search the woods, but they don't. However, I shake my night shirt so as to be free and easy for gun-play; but these boys are not bent on committing suicide. About ten minutes pass and the chug of the motors has died away and I'm just

about thinking of going back to town, when two white-robed figures suddenly enter the deserted glen. But they don't look around none, just lay off a bit. Then one of them, wanting a smoke, pulls off his hood and—and it's Feather-Face. Now, I got this bird sized up. Where he is, there is trouble.

Backing slowly out of the woods, I decided to sneak around and see if I can hear what they're saying. The moon is fairly bright, so I got to be mighty careful. And then, as I turn and go slowly through the trees, I hear the chug-chug of a motor. I peer through the trees and there by the roadside is a car—none of your flivvers this time, but a big touring car. The motor stops and a lad gets out and passes through the wood within ten feet of me. He ain't got no hood nor robe on, but I can't get a slant at his map.

I turn and follow him and as I reach the end of the clearing I hear him say to the others:

“Ed'll be here in ten minutes and then—”

“Sh!” cautions another voice.

But I don't wait to hear no more. I got ten minutes and I'm flying down the road to the place I left my bike. I ain't got time to duck in and out among the trees, but I don't meet no one, which ain't so much my luck as his.

And the bike's there and in less than ten minutes I'm about twenty feet behind that car, hidden in the bushes, ready to do a six-day race.

Five minutes later we all breeze off together—the four of them in the car and me following on the bike—none of us showing lights.

Now, the first part of that ride is not so bad, for they ain't bent on speed and the road is fairly level—but the moon goes behind a cloud and I got to hang close. On top of that we come to an upgrade and things are not so good. Then they turn up a steep and winding road and the bike ain't no good any more—at least, it's no good to me.

It looks like I'm stumped as I stand there panting and listening to the throb of the distant motor—and then the throb stops sudden—not just dies away. I look up the side of that hill and suddenly I see

a light—it just flashes for a moment and is gone. Enough—I park the bike in the woods and start in to hoof it.

Twenty minutes later I'm at the top of a steep hill—on the other side of me is a cliff and below a roaring mountain stream. I can hear the water dashing by far below. And then out comes the moon and about fifty feet away I see a log cabin almost on the very edge of the steep cliff. A little ways from it I see the big car.

There ain't no one in sight and I just duck around that cabin, trying to look in; but there's nothing doing. Oh, I can catch the flicker of light from between some of the cracks in the logs, but can't see in. There is only one window and that is boarded up. I try the door softly, but it's locked tight; then I go round back with half an idea of climbing to the roof in the hope of finding a crack big enough to peer through.

And then when I get around the side I hear the door open—it creaks mighty loud. Only a second and footsteps are coming around to the back. Both guns ready, I back to cover behind the opposite corner of the cabin and wait. The moon is fine and I see two men plainly as they approach the edge of the cliff, forcing a lithe figure of a boy between them. His arms are bound, but his legs ain't, and he's pleading with them in a low voice.

"I won't never tell about the murder—I won't never say a word about who done it."

His feet are giving from under him and they help him along.

"You're right—you won't never tell."

One of the men give a gruff laugh.

"Here, you, Ed, give him the knife and get the job done," he says to his companion.

"Oh, push him over," Ed answers, and I seen his stomach ain't strong for such work, for his voice breaks a bit.

"Here—give me the knife."

The other has a sneer in his tones. The next instant I see a flash of steel in the air above the boy.

Crack!

Yep, it's my gun what speaks and that lad goes out like a light. The other lad draws a gun and looks around him, bewildered. But

he don't see nothing; leastwise in this world he don't. I get him right through the head—there ain't no mistake where I land in that distance. He drops the wrong way—staggers a bit and I hear his body crashing down the cliff, tearing loose the rough stones as it goes.

Oh, I ain't a killer, but remember, there were four of them, that left two more to be accounted for yet; it wouldn't do to wound a lad and then have him pop up again when you least wanted to see him.

The boy just stands there—swinging back and forth on his weak legs—and I'm afraid he'll go over too.

“Lay down, you fool!” I says, and he drops like a log and lays still.

Then I wait. I know those gentlemen in the cabin must have heard the shots and be coming. Like a movie picture villain, a figure looms up from the side of the cabin; sneaking slowly along, the flash of nickel plainly visible in his hand. And like a movie villain he fades out of the picture. I got him.

“Number three,” I says and wait; the party ain't over yet.

And then there's a step behind me; like a foot upon dried twigs.

Like a shot I turn and in the rays of the moon spot the evil, sneering map of Feather-Face. His gun spoke ahead of mine—I knew that from the red-hot burn that shot along my temple—just above the ear it seemed to hurt most.

Of course I fired—emptied both guns, I guess. But I didn't see nothing when I shot—there were dancing, blazing lights before my eyes and then darkness—a deadly black darkness followed by a sinking feeling. I had stuck on my feet while I shot, but now I knew I was slipping; every minute I expected to hear the gun bark—but didn't.

Then there was the chug-chug of a motor—the grinding of hurriedly shifting gears; my firing had scared Feather-Face off. With that thought I sagged to the ground—everything went black.

When I come to again I was in the cabin and several men were leaning over me. One of them was in uniform and I recognized him for the Chief of Police of Clinton.

I hear them talking a minute; how they had come across Willie Thompson staggering down the road and how they had come out to

the cabin; and I gathered that Feather-Face had beat it—then curtains again.

I was all right—that is, to a certain extent—when I come to again. But I was in the coop, which was not so good. Yep, I opened my eyes in the jail at Clinton and a doctor was bending over me.

He had a real friendly face and his talk was good.

“You sure did for that gang,” he said. “I hope you come out of it all right. Oh, not your head—it must be as hard as rock—you’re all right there. I mean this little killing. You have a good lawyer—none better—and the judge has no use for the Klan. Thompson has told him his story—and it’s not a pretty one. Man, I tell you you have a first-class lawyer. I hear that it’s fixed up to release you on bail—on a writ of habeas corpus, they call it.”

“Then I’ll get out all right,” I said, relieved, for I had the idea that the Klan ran the town.

“Oh, the judge is with you, but the Klan—you see, there is a threat about town—death to the party that goes on your bail—and the trouble is that the people fear the Klan. They have a habit of making good on these little threats. Why, no one can visit you—the Klan’s orders again—of course they wouldn’t forbid you medical attention.”

“Then no one will have the nerve to go my bail?”

I sure was some surprised.

“That remains to be seen.” He shook his head, but there didn’t seem to be much hope in his voice.

But he didn’t tell me then that there also was a threat to storm the jail and there was much talk about asking for the State troops to be sent over.

And that’s that. I didn’t get much time to think; my mouthpiece sure did work fast, for by that afternoon I was hustled out of the jail by the Chief of Police and three or four other highly nervous gentlemen and rushed into court.

Some court; just one long, low-ceilinged room with great big windows on either side of it. It was warm and the windows were open and the bright sun shone in. But the faces about me—there was nothing bright and comforting about them; hostile, hard faces

they were, and a murmur, a threatening murmur of disapproval, ran through the room as I was led before the judge's bench. The judge was hard too, but his face was honest and almost defiant as he looked over the crowded courtroom.

My lawyer was there and talking, but I didn't get much of what he said, but I guess the judge was hurrying things along; the people looked like they might act up bad any minute. The District Attorney was objecting to everything—I wasn't surprised—I'd heard that he was mighty close in with the Klan.

Then the judge come out flat-footed and named the bail—not a large sum, neither; and he hammered on the bench as a low rumble of protest went up from the packed courtroom.

Then my lawyer says, slow and calm:

“Your honor, I have the bondsman here.”

My, you could hear a pin drop when he said that, and half the court stood up and looked around where the lawyer had pointed toward the door at the rear.

There comes a sudden rattling of windows from both sides; I look first at one of the big windows and then the other. There, on the two opposite window sills, had appeared the huge, stalwart frames of the Jabine boys. Motionless as statues they stood with their rifles swung loose beneath their armpits.

“Buck Jabine!”

I hear the hoarse whisper go up from ten voices at once. And I look toward the back door of the courtroom.

Right through the swinging doors had come Buck Jabine, his head erect, his eyes looking neither to left nor right. Straight between that path of gaping, angry faces, he made his way until he reached the bench. Not a hand was raised to stop him—not a mouth voiced even anger. You see, everyone there knew Buck Jabine and the boys. Two minutes later and everything was Jake.

So it was that I left the courthouse a free man and joined the procession of the Jabines. I was third in that single-file line as we made our way up the Main Street and out into the open country toward the Jabine farm. Not a word did we speak—just hoofed it

along. I wondered then if I made as forbidding an appearance as the family.

Thompson and his son were at the Jabine house and such a welcome you never did see. And the Jabines took it all without a smile—they were all business and no mistake.

Of course I got the lowdown on the whole affair from the Thompsons. Willie Thompson had made some discoveries about the murder at the town twenty miles away—it was Feather-Face and his three friends what had pulled it off in the name of the Klan. There was robbery behind it and Willie had come across that little cabin in the hills and seen them splitting some of the swag. Enough! They nailed him and was just waiting for things to blow over a bit before they bumped him off and let his body float away below the cliff.

After that things happened in town. The real story came out and I was never even brought before the Grand Jury. It appears that even with the truth most of the Grand Jury wanted to hold me at first—you see, they were thick with the Klan. Then things started.

Ten members of the Klan who were on the Grand Jury up and resigned from the Klan; they come out flat and told the judge how they felt and how they had joined the organization just like they would have joined any other fraternal organization. The end of it was that the judge discharged me without my ever showing up in court.

You see, it was better for me not to be seen about too much. The Klan was slipping and members were leaving it every day; and what's more, an Anti-Klan organization was forming, though Buck Jabine would have nothing to do with either one of them. Altogether things were bad in Clinton; both factions went around armed and defiant. The Klan had sure lost its grip.

But of Feather-Face nothing was heard; both sides sought him now, equally bent on vengeance. I could see that Feather-Face's position was not an enviable one—still, he kept clear of Clinton.

“There weren't no harm in the old order,” Jabine opened up to me one evening. “My father was in the Klan back in the Sixties. But this modern Ku Klux Klan was a money-making graft bent on raising religious and racial hatred. Of course half the crime laid to their

doors wasn't true, but it gave others the opportunity to masquerade under their name. You can't defy law and order and the rights of your fellow-man without the criminal element sneaking in. Robbery, murder, private vengeance—that's all what could come of it. And it took you—you, a stranger, to show it all up in its proper light."

And from then until the day I left that was all Buck Jabine had to say on the subject.

The night that the Thompsons, father and son, came to the house in their little car to drive me to the station, Buck said:

"I have arranged for the train to stop at Haddon Junction, five miles down. You see"—he turned to Old Thompson—"the folks of Clinton were planning to give Race Williams, here, a little sendoff and it won't do. The Klan spirit is dead. Why bring it up again? There are enough left to make trouble if any popular demonstration is shown. The Klan is slipping—slipping fast and I say let it slip."

Well, I was agreeable, though I think Willie Thompson—who had become somewhat of a hero about town—was disappointed and felt badly about it. But the cash transaction was all that interested me. I had mailed the check which Thompson had given me along to my New York bank and—well—I didn't have no doubts on it—but I'd be glad to get home and do a little drawing on it.

So I shook hands with Buck and got a few grunts out of the Jabine boys. Then I said good-bye to the ladies—I didn't mention the ladies before, but it will be enough to say that they were sure some Amazons and would make a good showing in a free-for-all. And—well—I was off. Old Thompson and me in the front seat and Willie Thompson in the rear. It sure felt good to be on the go again with my twin gats parked nicely about me.

At nine-thirty we was only about a quarter of a mile from the station and ten minutes to catch the train, when we have trouble. Blooey! Both the rear tires go like a couple of cannon; so sudden did it come that I had half drawn my gun.

Then I watched the two of them stall around a minute. I could see the one light of the little station shining in the distance, so I decided to hoof it. These lads treated an automobile like a steamroller—only

one spare tire and an inner tube on hand. They'd be a half-hour at least; what with scratching their heads and pulling up their pants.

I wouldn't listen to their protests about waiting over another night and I wouldn't let one of them come along to the station with me; they weren't fit to be separated—too slow-thinking birds they were. No, sir, I was booked for the city and going through.

So I swung out my suitcase and after a couple of handshakes started down the road. I hoofed it fast, but I got a-thinking while I walked; got a-thinking as I looked down and kicked some mighty dirty-looking pieces of glass and half a broken bottle from the road.

I could hear the train coming along and see her headlight flashing down the tracks as I reached the station. Now, there was no station master at this Haddon Junction and only one light on the north side of the station—the side the train was approaching from. So, bag in hand, I started to pass under that light and out onto the platform—then I stopped dead—that broken bottle had suddenly loomed up before me as big as life. I just ducked back and made my way cautiously around the other side of the station. Not really suspicious, you understand—only careful. And that's the secret of why I hope to die in bed.

Bang! Like that! I duck into a chap who is coming slowly from around the south end of the station. We hit with a crash and both step back a pace; he out on the platform toward the tracks.

Was he quick? Well, he never had no chance. Mind you, he had his gun in his hand, but he never used it. Just as clean as a whistle I had pulled and shot him straight between his bloodshot eyes. The train roared into the station as he fell and in the light of the headlight as it flashed by I got a look at his face. Oh, I knew it before, even in the dull light of the moon. Yep, you hit it—it was Feather-Face. You recollect I once told him that he'd be half a second too late.

And then the brakeman swung out on the step; I climbed aboard; he swung his lantern and we were off.

"Thought I heard a shot," the brakeman said as he climbed up the steps behind me, where I struggled with the door.

You see, I couldn't tell what he had seen and I wanted to hear if he had any comments to make. I had half an idea that I had already done enough shooting to please the people of Clinton.

"Yep."

I turn and look the man over as the train gains headway.

"Yep, a dog snapped at me—a dirty dog—I killed him—with this."

With that I shoved my gun out under his chin sudden as I watched to see how he took it.

"Thought I saw a figure—a human figure."

He lays down his lantern and stretches his hand up toward the emergency strap.

Then in the dim light from his lantern I catch the glimpse of a tiny button beneath his coat—yep, his lapel is half twisted around and I take a chance that the letters on that button are KOTOP.

Looking him straight in the eyes, I suddenly raise my right hand and place it over my right eye, palm in—then I reverse the hand, giving him the Klan salute.

His hand lingers for a moment on the bell, but I see that his fingers loosen their grip.

"AYAK," he says.

"AKIA," I answer.

His hand drops from the bell and without another word he turns and enters the forward car. I stand so a moment; then with a grin I slip into the rear car. After all that is said against the Klan, I sure got to admit that there are times when it serves its purpose.